Article

The Conference on Christianity & Literature

Christianity & Literature
2018, Vol. 68(1) 117–130

DOI: 10.1177/0148333118789757
journals.sagepub.com/home/cal



The Hermeneutic Circle, Textual Integrity, and the Validity of Interpretation

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Abstract

In both China and the West, there is an emphasis on the literal sense as the basis of all interpretations. By discussing the hermeneutic circle, the textual integrity, and the connection of the theological tradition from Augustine to Aquinas and Luther with contemporary literary theory, this essay comments on the various concepts and argues for the importance of the plain or literal sense of the text for valid interpretation.

Keywords

the hermeneutic circle, textual coherence, biblical exegesis, Chinese commentary tradition

In his magnum opus, *Guan zhui bian* or *Limited Views*, the erudite modern scholar Qian Zhongshu (1910–98) introduces the western concept of "the hermeneutic circle" to Chinese scholarship and brings it into comparison with traditional eighteenth-century Chinese philological principles of textual understanding:

> The philological learning of the Qianlong and Jiajing periods (1736–1820) taught the principle that one must first recognize the sense of words before one may know

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> the meaning of a sentence, and when one knows the meaning of sentences, one may then understand the import of the whole piece, and further see the intent of the entire book. Even so, that principle covers just one side of the matter and is rather rudimentary. On the other side, one must also understand the import of the whole piece and even the intent of the entire book ("intent") so as to determine the meaning of a particular sentence ("text"), and one must understand the meaning of a whole sentence so as to determine the literal sense of a particular word ("wording"); one must even comprehend the author's purpose in writing the piece, the trend of literary forms popular at the time, and the particular genre or rhetorical style fit for the writing before one may have a general idea of the aim of the whole piece or the entire book. By accumulating small parts, one comes to see the big whole, and by keeping the big whole in purview, one puts the small parts in place; one may explore the twigs to the roots, and also follow the roots to the twigs; coming and going repeatedly so that one may reach a comprehensive understanding without one-sidedness, and that is what "the hermeneutic circle" (*der hermeneutische Zirkel*) is all about. (Qian 1:171)

In a footnote to this passage, Qian Zhongshu quotes Wilhelm Dilthey's "*Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik*" in the German original and Luigi Pareyson's *Estetica* in Italian as references. This is typical of Qian's style, as he always quotes from a variety of classical Chinese texts and moves on effortlessly to cite several western sources in their original languages to make his point clear and compelling by the force of copious multilingual textual evidence. His comparison of Qing dynasty philological learning with the discussion of hermeneutics in Dilthey and others is the first time "the hermeneutic circle" as a critical term appeared in Chinese scholarly writings.[1] In the western tradition, the concept of the hermeneutic circle originated from long traditions of biblical exegesis and the study of Greco-Roman classics, and it has close relations with, and important implications for, issues concerning Scripture, canon, adequate understanding, and the validity of interpretation. This article notes affinities between the classical Chinese responses to these questions and the resources of western theology for addressing the problems of interpretation raised by contemporary literary theories.

It is important to note Qian's mention of the Chinese philological scholarship that puts understanding on the solid grounds of language and the practice of reading; and that is also the major contribution Friedrich Schleiermacher made when he initiated the project of general hermeneutics. For Schleiermacher, an author is not just a psychological being, but also a linguistic being, and to understand an author's speech, one must attend to both the psychological and the grammatical moments. "Language is the only presupposition in hermeneutics, and everything that is to be found, including the other objective and subjective presuppositions, must be discovered in language," says Schleiermacher (50). It is through articulation in language that a speaker

makes his thoughts accessible in communication. "One must already know a man in order to understand what he says, and yet one first becomes acquainted with him by what he says," Schleiermacher observes (56). Language speaks through the author as much as the author speaks the language, because "each person represents a locus where a given language takes shape in a particular way, and his speech can be understood only in the context of the totality of the language" (98). Given the fact that Dilthey's *Lebensphilosophie* had a profound influence on the way Schleiermacher was understood in the nineteenth century, the emphasis on language here is significant. "The traditional label of the psychologism of Schleiermacher's position can no longer be maintained," as Kurt Mueller-Vollmer comments. "Even the purely intentional mental side of speech—speech as a mental phenomenon—is not free from language. It is always conditioned and modified by its linguistic form" (Mueller-Vollmer 11–12). In Schleiermacher's theory of hermeneutics, an author is understood as a person in so far as he is understood in his language.

Articulation in language, however, is not a simple process but a complex one that calls for interpretation, which means that understanding is gained only with continuous effort of interpretation. Hermeneutics as the art of interpretation, as Schleiermacher argues, is firmly grounded in the close and complex relationship between thinking and speaking through language. "Speaking is the medium for the communality of thought [*die Gemeinschaftlichkeit des Denkens*]," he says:

> Indeed, a person thinks by means of speaking. Thinking matures by means of internal speech, and to that extent speaking is only developed thought. But whenever the thinker finds it necessary to fix what he has thought, there arises the art of speaking, that is, the transformation of original internal speaking, and interpretation becomes necessary. (97)

Interpretation as a hermeneutic activity becomes necessary for understanding because the process of articulation, which by nature contains linguistic multivalence, polysemy, and figurality, tends to lead others away from what the speaker wants to say. Thus we cannot assume that understanding naturally happens; on the contrary, as Schleiermacher argues, we must take as the basic assumption of a strong version of hermeneutics that "misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point" (110). That is of course the reason why adequate understanding of canonical texts, be it the Bible, the Homeric epics, Buddhist sutras, or the Confucian classics, has always been a major concern in different cultures and at the core of exegetical and commentary traditions in the East and the West. As canonical texts are thought to have very high values for a culture and a tradition, understanding them adequately is crucial for the sustenance of that tradition; and philology and the hermeneutic circle all provide tools to achieve the goal of adequate understanding and valid interpretation. The point of the hermeneutic circle,

as Qian Zhongshu points out, of all the strenuous effort to move back and forth between the parts and the whole or, in philological terms, the repeated coming and going from words and sentences to the text, and from the text back to sentences and words, is to "reach a comprehensive understanding without one-sidedness." That is to say, adequate understanding is one that takes into consideration all the textual elements, from words and sentences to the text as a whole, and presents a coherent interpretation in which each part is confirmed and supported by other parts, rather than a partial and one-sided interpretation predicated on just one or several parts at the expense of other parts, which thus necessarily runs into contradiction with the other parts.

The notion that a text is coherent with different parts coming together and mutually supportive of one another, rather than an internally contradictory and messy aggregation, becomes a widely held idea of a scriptural or canonical text. In reality, a Scripture or a canonical text may indeed have different interpretations, but the idea of textual coherence is a general assumption for commentators and interpreters, who try to understand the text on that assumption and argue for the validity of their interpretations by showing how comprehensively they have taken into consideration the various parts of the text and connecting them into a total structure of intelligibility. In the Chinese tradition, the idea of textual coherence, the assumption that a text admits no contradictions within its own totality, finds many expressions. For example, in his conversations with several interlocutors, Mencius (ca. 371–ca. 289 BC) explains some passages from the canonical *Book of Poetry* to make sense of some poetic lines that might on the surface seem to baffle the reader's mind; and he famously says about interpreting the words of poets that "the interpreter of a poem should not let the words obscure the text, or the text obscure the intention. To trace back to the original intention with sympathetic understanding: that is the way to do it" (Jiao 5a.4; 377). In Mencius's view, words, text, and the author's intention form a coherent whole, in which the interpreter should not let one element obscure any other. When a rhetorical device is used, which is particularly common in poetry, one should understand the figurative meaning of the text not literally, but in the context of the whole: "If one should merely understand the text literally, then consider these lines from the poem *Yun han*: 'Of the remaining populace of Zhou/Not one single soul survived.' Taken as literal truth, this would mean that of all the Zhou people not a single person remained alive" (Jiao 5a.4; 377). For adequate understanding, then, the interpreter must be able to identify and differentiate the literal from the figurative, the plain sense from the rhetorical trope with a different metaphorical or allegorical meaning.

In the biblical exegetical tradition, textual coherence or integrity is also an important principle that can be traced to St. Augustine's theologically important book, *On Christian Doctrine*, which provides guidance to readers for an adequate understanding of the Holy Scriptures. At the very beginning of that book, an uncanny coincidence reveals some unexpected and deep affinities of religious

texts from the East and the West. Before getting into the matter of how to read and understand the scriptural text, Augustine makes a disclaimer that whatever guidance he could provide, there will always be some who will fail to understand because they simply do not have sufficient vision to see the point, but they should not blame the author for their own failure. He uses an interesting metaphor to describe those readers' lack of vision:

> In the same way, if they wished to see the old and the new moon or some very small star which I was pointing to with my finger and they did not have keen enough sight even to see my finger, they should not on that account become angry with me. And those who have studied and learned these precepts and still do not understand the obscurities of the Holy Scriptures think that they can see my finger but not the heavenly bodies which it was intended to point out. But both of these groups should stop blaming me and ask God to give them vision. Although I can lift my finger to point something out, I cannot supply the vision by means of which either this gesture or what it indicates can be seen. (Prologue; 3–4)

For anyone familiar with Buddhist texts, this is surprisingly familiar and yet astonishing to find in a book of Christian theology, because the finger and the moon, though completely unrelated with Augustine's work, are a commonly used metaphor in Buddhist texts. For example, the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* ridicules the lack of understanding of a foolish man who only looks at the finger but not at the moon it points to. The same metaphor also appears in another Buddhist text, the *Sūrangama Sūtra*, in which Buddha tells his disciple Ānanda, "You are still using your clinging mind to listen to the Dharma . . . This is like a man pointing a finger at the moon to show it to others who should follow the direction of the finger to look at the moon. If they look at the finger and mistake it for the moon, they lose (sight of) both the moon and the finger" (*Sūrangama Sūtra* 31). It is indeed the pleasant surprise of sheer serendipity that, despite linguistic, cultural, social, and historical differences, Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* and the Mahayana Buddhist sutras should use the same metaphor to indicate the same or at least a similar problem of the difficulty of spiritual understanding.

St. Augustine specifically mentions "the obscurities of the Holy Scriptures," which constitutes a major problem for understanding. In the Holy Scriptures, he argues, there are two kinds of signs, literal and figurative, and it is important to differentiate them. Signs "are called literal when they are used to designate those things on account of which they were instituted." For example, *bos* in Latin means "ox," and the word is used as a natural sign in its literal sense "when we mean an animal of a herd." On the other hand,

> Figural signs occur when that thing which we designate by a literal sign is used to signify something else; thus we say "ox" and by that syllable understand the animal which is ordinarily designated by that word, but again by that animal we

> understand an evangelist, as is signified in the Scripture, according to the interpretation of the Apostle, when it says, "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn." (II.x.15; 43)

Augustine's discussion of the figurative sign recalls Mencius's discussion of the use of metaphor or hyperbole in the poem *Yun han*, that the lines, "Of the remaining populace of Zhou / Not one single soul survived," should not be understood as literally true because it would be false to state that not a single person from the Zhou survived. The hyperbolic expression is meant to stress the idea that a very large number of the Zhou populace died of a terrible famine or some other disaster, but not all of them died. Likewise, Augustine here speaks of the word "ox" as a figurative sign that means not just the animal we call "ox," but metaphorically an "evangelist." But how does one know if a sign is used literally or figuratively? When readers encounter semantic or syntactic ambiguities, or ambiguities in punctuation or pronunciation, and so on, the hermeneutic principle to guide them, says Augustine, should first be the rule of faith, and then the context of the parts that precede and follow the ambiguous passages in question. The second half of this principle is an early formulation of the hermeneutic circle as it puts the ambiguous passage in the larger context of the text as a whole for adequate understanding. Augustine warns the reader not to confuse the literal with the figurative, and he spells out the exegetical principle: "Therefore a method of determining whether a locution is literal or figurative must be established. And generally this method consists in this: that whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behavior or to the truth of faith you must take to be figurative" (III.x.14; 87–88). That is to say, the figurative signs and obscure passages in the Scriptures must be interpreted within the whole context of Christian theology.

For Augustine, the "rule of faith" is the ultimate guide to understanding, plainly stated in the Bible itself. As he puts it, "the rule of faith should be consulted as it is found in the more open places of the Scriptures and in the authority of the Church" (III.ii.2; 79). Just as there are literal and figurative signs in the Scriptures, there are plain passages with clear meanings in the Scriptures and obscure passages that hide their meanings from the vulgar eye, only to be discovered with pleasure by those who go beyond the plainness and seek the significance of the rhetorical adornment. The meaning of many passages in the Old Testament is obscured by rhetorical tropes, says Augustine, but "the more these things seem to be obscured by figurative words, the sweeter they become when they are explained" (IV.vii.15; 128–29). Thus the Scriptures contain both kinds of passages with different functions. "Thus the Holy Spirit," says Augustine, "has magnificently and wholesomely modulated the Holy Scriptures so that the more open places present themselves to hunger and the more obscure places may deter a disdainful attitude. Hardly anything may be found in these obscure places which is not found plainly said elsewhere" (II.vi.8; 38).

This last statement is of extreme importance in biblical hermeneutics, because it ascertains the preeminence of the plain or literal sense of the scriptural text and thus maintains textual integrity, thereby setting up the exegetical principle that any interpretation of the Scriptures must be based on the plain sense and take different parts of the text into consideration, which serves to guard against far-fetched and one-sided misreading and misinterpretations.

The exegetical principle first articulated in Augustine's theological work was adopted by Thomas Aquinas in an essential passage in *Summa theologica*, in which Aquinas argues that the literal or historical sense is the first and most elementary way of understanding the scriptural text:

> Thus in Holy Scripture no confusion results, for all the senses are founded on one—the literal—from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended allegorically, as Augustine says. Nevertheless, nothing of Holy Scripture perishes because of this, since nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward clearly by the Scripture in its literal sense. (Aquinas 1a.1.10; 1:17)

Aquinas acknowledges the authority of Augustine in taking the literal sense of the Scriptures as the foundation of all interpretations, and this needs to be seen in the historical context of Aquinas's time. Umberto Eco argues that the thirteenth century witnessed a great change in the medieval mentality from a universal symbolism of spiritual meanings to the conceptualization of nature as an ontological structure with its own formal reality of things, and that this change was best represented by Thomas Aquinas, "the person who gave most complete expression to the philosophical and theological thinking of the age" (Eco, *Aquinas* 140). Prior to Aquinas, the Old Testament was traditionally understood allegorically, and from Paul to Origen, as Karlfried Froehlich remarks, the early Christian reading of the Old Testament "took the form of an eschatological typology: the events of Jewish history were read as prefiguring the events of the end time which had begun in the revelation of Jesus Christ" (9–10). In such an allegorical typology, the Old Testament was devoid of historical reality and only served as prefiguring what was to come in the New Testament. When Aquinas declared that all the senses of the Scriptures, including the allegorical and spiritual meanings, are founded on the literal sense alone, then, as Eco comments, the events of Jewish history became historically real in themselves as well as carrying spiritual meanings, and thus "the incidents and persons of the sacred history have the value of a *sign*—that as well as their historical truth and reality they also have a symbolical reality" (*Aquinas* 151). This is in line with the great change in the thirteenth century as represented by Aquinas. "Universal allegory is thus liquidated," as Eco observes. "With Aquinas we witness a kind of secularization of postbiblical history and the natural world" (*Aquinas* 152). In this connection we can understand the importance of Aquinas's affirmation of

the preeminence of the literal sense of Holy Scripture, and see the connection of his view with that of Augustine for the formation of an exegetical tradition that understands the Bible as a coherent and self-explanatory book, a tradition that has exerted a remarkable influence on the later development of hermeneutics and literary theory.

Such an exegetical tradition with emphasis on the literal sense of the scriptural text was further strengthened at another turning point in the development of Christian theology when Martin Luther made the Bible the foundation of his doctrine of *sola fide* and reaffirmed the primacy of the literal sense of the Scriptures. "The Holy Spirit," says Luther, "is the simplest writer and speaker in heaven and on earth. This is why his words can have no more than the one simplest meaning which we call the written one, or the literal meaning of the tongue" (Luther 39:178). Froehlich argues that Luther inherited late medieval, and specifically Thomist, presuppositions in three aspects: namely, the interest in the literal sense, in the clarity of Scriptures, and in historical continuity of the exegetical tradition. "The Holy Scripture," in Luther's classic formulation, "is its own interpreter (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*)" (Froehlich 134). In his anti-Catholic polemics, Luther wanted to free the Bible from the control of the church enacted through the elaborate commentaries of the Church Fathers; and it was therefore important for Luther and his theological position to insist on the self-explanatory nature of the Scriptures. From Augustine through Aquinas to Luther, the exegetical tradition in Christian theology thus puts emphasis on the preeminence of the literal sense, but that literal sense is not rigidly opposed to the spiritual or allegorical meaning in the interpretation of the Bible. I have discussed what I call the "complexity of the literal" elsewhere (see Zhang 114–31), but the emphasis on the idea that all interpretations must be based on the plain and literal sense of the Scriptures offers a way to guard against what are considered heresies of misreading and misinterpretations, the willful distortion of what the text of the Bible says.

The emphasis on the preeminence of the literal sense in the exegetical tradition from Augustine to Aquinas and Luther becomes surprisingly useful and relevant in the debate about meaning and interpretation in a very different and secularized context of contemporary literary theory. From hermeneutics, reception theory, and reader-response criticism to many different schools of postmodern and postcolonial critical theories, a major tendency in twentieth-century western literary theory is the recognition of the reader's creative role in the reading and interpretation of a text, and at the same time the decreasing acknowledgement of the author's relevance. Much of this is a corrective for the positivistic tendency in older criticism that reads literature almost as a footnote to the author's biography, but there is also the problem of going to the other extreme in the radical and often politicized postmodern theories in negating the role of the author, perhaps most famously pronounced by Roland Barthes that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the

Author" (148). This kind of either/or thinking is typical of many of the pronouncements in contemporary western literary theories, and many have ironically followed author Barthes's injunction to ignore or marginalize the author, while putting the reader at the center of critical attention.

What is known as American reader-response criticism is another example. It started with the full acknowledgement of the reader's role in actively *making sense* of the literary text and therefore cocreating what the text means, but very quickly, particularly as formulated in the works of Stanley Fish, reader-response criticism turned into a solipsistic theory in which the reader hardly responds to anything, but creates everything, including that to which the reader is supposed to respond. By discussing some well-known cases of different interpretations of the same text, Fish described such interpretations as circular and self-perpetuating: "I 'saw' what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see, and then I turned around and attributed what I had 'seen' to a text and an intention" (163). What Fish describes is of course the circularity of a hermeneutic circle, even though he did not use that term; and that circularity was fully acknowledged as a problem, for example, by Dilthey when he says, "we are here at the limits of all interpretation; it can only fulfil its task to a degree; so all understanding always remains relative and can never be completed. *Individuum est ineffabile*" (259). But because of the circularity of all interpretations, Fish comes to the radical and ultimately untenable conclusion that all interpretations are merely subjective, and that "the objectivity of the text is an illusion" (43). Despite all the cleverness and sophistication of Fish's argument, is the total negation of the text justifiable on the basis of the hermeneutic circle and the historicity of understanding? Is circularity the essence of what the hermeneutic circle is all about?

It is true that the hermeneutic activity starts with what Martin Heidegger calls the "fore-structure" of understanding or what H. G. Gadamer deliberately calls "prejudices." The idea of the hermeneutic circle, that is, that understanding moves back and forth from the parts to the whole and from the whole to the parts, can easily be misunderstood as constituting a circular interpretation that only confirms one's subjective expectations and prejudices. But the hermeneutic circle is not about the subjectivity of understanding, nor confirmation of the interpreter's "prejudices." "The circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move," says Heidegger. "It is the expression of the existential *fore-structure* of Dasein itself. It is not to be reduced to the level of vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing" (195). That is to say, Heidegger's hermeneutic circle is not a circle of self-confirmation of pure subjectivity, but a process in which one's prior expectations, anticipations, or prejudices are to be challenged and modified by external factors as "things themselves," by the text and the world itself that exist outside oneself. "All correct interpretation," says Gadamer, "must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought, and it must direct its gaze 'on the

things themselves'" (266–67). So the hermeneutic circle is not at all a vicious circle only to legitimize the subjectivity of the interpreter; rather, it is the necessary means to reach adequate understanding by always modifying one's anticipations and expectations according to "the things themselves." Gadamer never loses sight of objectivity, even though he fully acknowledges the interaction between the interpreter and the object of interpretation. Indeed, there is a crucial moment in *Truth and Method* that has not received sufficient attention in the debate: commenting on Paul Valéry's claim that his poetry has whatever meaning the reader attributes to it, Gadamer rejects this totally relativistic view as "an untenable hermeneutic nihilism" (95). Gadamer acknowledges that we all understand differently, and the possibility of different interpretations is a common feature in the aesthetic experience of art and literature; but that does not mean that all understanding is equally valid, or that no criteria exist to assess the relative validity of different interpretations.

Given the acknowledgement of the role of the reader in contemporary literary theories, what would be the criteria of valid interpretations? The German mystic Jakob Böhme's writings are sometimes sarcastically compared to a "picnic," to which the author brings the words and the reader supplies the meaning, an analogy Tzvetan Todorov borrowed to mock Stanley Fish's reader-response criticism (see Todorov 187). Umberto Eco, who had advocated the role of the reader and the literary work's openness to different interpretations, ingeniously proposed an interesting concept by suggesting that "between the intention of the author (very difficult to find out and frequently irrelevant for the interpretation of a text) and the intention of the interpreter who (to quote Richard Rorty) simply 'beats the text into a shape which will serve for his purpose,' there is a third possibility. There is *an intention of the text*" (Eco, *Interpretation* 25). Eco is obviously trying to find a balance between the old deterministic concept of the author and the untenable extreme claims made by American reader-response criticism, and the novel concept of *intentio operis* is the only way to restore some legitimacy to the text's own influence on the reader and the reading process. The "intention of the text" is not something displayed on the surface, however. "One has to decide to 'see' it," Eco says. "Thus it is possible to speak of the text's intention only as the result of a conjecture on the part of a reader" (*Interpretation* 64). If that is the case, does it mean that "the intention of the text" is also, as Fish would argue, the reader's creation? Insofar as reading is an action, the reader of course takes the initiative, but like any other action, reading is acting upon something outside the reader's presence and cannot be totally subjective. Eco draws on the idea of textual coherence and integrity in the exegetical tradition we have discussed earlier to provide an answer to the question,

> How to prove a conjecture about the *intentio operis*? The only way is to check it upon the text as a coherent whole. This idea, too, is an old one and comes from Augustine (*De doctrina christiana*): any interpretation given of a certain portion of

> a text can be accepted if it is confirmed by, and must be rejected if it is challenged by, another portion of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader. (*Interpretation* 65)

The extreme solipsism of reader-response criticism, like many other such excessive claims made by some literary theorists in the last few decades of the twentieth century, is no longer fashionable today, and the fact that Eco evoked the exegetical tradition dating back from Augustine to correct a contemporary error proves the enduring relevance of the concept of textual coherence and integrity.

The desire to understand the text, particularly a scriptural or canonical one, and to read it in a way free from the control or obfuscation of what Eco calls "overinterpretations," often indicates a historic moment of great changes. Luther's reaffirmation of the preeminence of the literal sense of the Bible was related to the Reformation and its effort to free the Bible from Catholic commentaries. In Chinese history, a very similar situation appeared much earlier than Luther's time, during the Song dynasty in the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, when many literati-officials rebelled against the previous generations of Confucian commentators on the classics.

The first influential scholar to question the Han-Tang commentary tradition was Ouyang Xiu (A.D. 1007–A.D. 1072), the leader on the literary scene at the time, and followed by many of his contemporaries. As the great Song dynasty Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (A.D. 1130–A.D. 1200) explains, "Scholars in the past had never gone beyond the annotations and commentaries, and only with Yongshu, Yuanfu, Sun Mingfu and others, we started to see arguments out of themselves" (Zhu 6:2089). They could make their own arguments by returning to the canonical texts without the heavily imposed overinterpretations of the previous Han and Tang commentators, and interpret the canon in the context of the classics themselves. As Zhou Yukai argues, the skeptical attitude of the Song dynasty scholars represented a rational approach to the classics, for

> a blind obedience to authority signals the withering of reason, while skepticism of traditional annotations and commentaries originated from the rise of rationality. Speaking of his motivations of doubting the ancient commentaries, Ouyang Xiu explained that he wanted to discard all those distorting and confusing interpretations that had deviated from the Confucian teachings and to go back to the original meanings of the Confucian classics. (Zhou 210)

Zhu Xi himself put emphasis on the natural style and the plain sense of the Confucian classics, arguing that "the words of the sages are clear and easy to understand, for they used words to make the *Dao* manifest so that later generations may seek it in their writings. If the sages wanted to make their words hard to understand, they surely would not have created any of the classics"

(Zhu 8:3318). The ancients, says Zhu Xi, wrote in a natural manner, easily accessible, as if with "a tone and accent that are born naturally" (8:3322).

Though the differences in culture and history are huge, Zhu Xi's emphasis on the natural style of writing and the clarity of the literal sense of the Confucian classics strikes us as remarkably similar to the idea Luther inherited from Augustine and Aquinas, namely, that "Holy Scripture is its own interpreter" (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*). Like Luther, Zhu Xi's emphasis on the easy accessibility of the classics also led to a way of reading the canonical text more directly than through the traditional commentaries, and consequently Zhu Xi and the Song dynasty scholarship contributed to the transformation of Chinese culture and tradition. Zhu Xi became tremendously influential not just in China but in the whole region of East Asia before the twentieth century. Perhaps Zhu Xi's importance in the history of classic studies and general hermeneutics can now be known not just in China and East Asia, but in the global context of international scholarship.

Allow me to conclude very simply: the one important lesson we can learn from both the East and the West—for classical studies, biblical exegesis, or literary theory and criticism—is that interpretation, though never absolute, complete, exhaustive, and always endowed with rich possibilities, cannot deviate too far from the text itself. A more reasonable way to think of hermeneutics and textual criticism must resist the temptation of radical extremism, and must take into consideration the author, the text, and the reader, not just one at the expense of the other. The hermeneutic circle goes on, and when it seems to have reached the contingency of a temporary solution, it only starts yet another circle that reaches farther and deeper *ad infinitum*.

Note

1. The "hermeneutic circle" is an account of interpretation that originated in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and was developed by Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and others. In reading a text, we start with individual words, and the accumulation of the meaning of words leads us to the meaning of sentences and then that of the entire text, but at the same time, we understand the meaning of individual words in the context of sentences and the entire text. That reciprocal movement from the parts to the whole, and from the whole to the parts, is known as the "hermeneutic circle."

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